

Testimony in opposition to elimination of General Assistance and barring asylum seekers and certain immigrant groups from accessing TANF and Food Assistance.

My name is Mouna Ismail and I live in Lewiston. I am originally from Djibouti and I am an asylee here in Maine. Asylum as I understand it means protection and shelter from harm. I left my country because I feared for the safety of my children and myself. The decision to flee was a very hard one to make. I had to leave my husband and my family. Some in my family I may never see again, especially now with the uncertainty at the national level. I want to still believe that here in the USA I will be treated like a human being who has full rights and dignity.

When I arrived here in Maine, it was because of General Assistance, TANF and Food assistance that I was able to get on my feet and start to make a better life. Without that temporary assistance my life would be very different than it is now. My children and I would have found ourselves in the family shelter or sleeping in chairs in the bus station as many do when they first arrive. I wouldn't have learned the language or found employment so quickly if we didn't have shelter or food.

If there is a beautiful dream of safety and freedom that many immigrants hold, this is my dream too. I have my associate degree in International Business and I plan to return to school this fall. My dream is to open a small business like so many immigrants before me. There are services missing for women in my community. I want to open a business that caters to their needs. There'll be a store front with traditional clothing, a hair salon and an exercise space just for women. There are many other women who come with dreams like these and a readiness to work hard towards them. All good outcomes take an investment. Maine has invested in me and I am grateful.

Now I work as a part time interpreter at Lewiston hospitals and as a cultural broker for Lewiston Pediatric Associates. My husband was able to join me here. It is an amazing gift to have our family reunited. I have a beautiful 8 month old and 3 older children who are thriving here. They see themselves as American kids. My older son tells me: "I wasn't born here so I can't be president. But my little brother can be." And he really believes in this possibility. My kids are the future of Maine. This is their country and this is their state.

Today I am able to support myself and my children. But I tell you this wouldn't have been possible without the support of GA, TANF and Food assistance. These supports helped us feel safe and enabled us to recover from the suffering of our past. I know that if these benefits are interrupted, many mothers and children will be left homeless and hungry. Please do not bar asylum seekers and other immigrant groups from realizing their full humanity and potential here.